

HOLOCAUST MOVIES IN THE CLASSROOM

by Martin Destroismaisons

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed on January 27 each year to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. This day is for remembering the genocide that resulted in the death of an estimated six million Jews, one million Gypsies, 250,000 mentally and physically disabled people, and 9000 homosexual men by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

Teaching a subject as difficult to rationalize as the Holocaust requires from the educator a certain sensitivity and expertise. Even more so when using a movie as a pedagogical tool is contemplated—one has to use extreme caution when using a Holocaust movie in class as many are flawed or require supplementary explanations. Since a complete analysis of all the cinematographic resources is impossible in the confines of this article, the objective of the following text is to shed some light on this subject by assessing five Holocaust movies used in Canadian classrooms.

Let's start with a classic of the genre, *Schindler's List* directed and co-produced by Steven Spielberg (United States, 1993). This impressive movie is about Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist who used his position in order to save the lives of more than a thousand Jews. This movie is recommended for two reasons. *Schindler's List* can be used to explain who the Righteous among the Nations are which cannot be said of all of the Holocaust movies (Righteous Among the Nations is an honorific used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis). Secondly, and this is by far more important, Spielberg's movie contains a lesson concerning the survival of a certain freedom of choice under even the most tyrannical totalitarian regimes. By analyzing Schindler's behaviour during WW II, a student can come to the vital conclusion that the Germans could resist; it was only the scary implications of resisting that made people "look away."

A few years after *Schindler's List's* success, Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (Italy, 1997) was released. This very moving film presents the vicissitudes of a father and his son who are both interned in a German concentration camp. The huge box-office hit, winner of three Oscars, is unfortunately not above critical appraisal. The most recurrent critique made by historians towards Benigni's vision is that it trivializes the Holocaust by suggesting that it's possible to hide the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp from a child. If teachers choose to use *Life is Beautiful*, it's imperative that their students understand that the scenario represents more the director's vision than the actual reality of the Holocaust in Italy. Even so, I wouldn't recommend *Life is Beautiful* because it tends to diminish the sufferings of the victims.

A very interesting movie used in classrooms all across the nation is *The Pianist* (Poland, 2002). It tells the story of a famous Jewish pianist, Wladyslaw Szpilman, who miraculously survived the Second World War in Poland. This movie contains horrible images; its director, Roman Polanski, chose to present a realistic depiction of the Holocaust. Because of the disturbing images, teachers

must thoroughly prepare their students to what they are about to see. Although it is preferable to show *The Pianist* only to older students, this movie nonetheless is important because it reflects the nature of war and shows "good" and "bad" Jews, Poles and Germans.

The most recent movie of this short survey, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (UK, 2008), is often shown in classrooms. Unfortunately, I would never counsel a teacher to use it; it's an historically inaccurate and unbelievable movie about the friendship between Bruno, the son of an SS officer, and Shmuel, a Jewish concentration camp inmate. I won't even get deeper into the storyline; in my opinion it is a distortion of history and therefore not a good teaching tool.

Saving the best for last, we have Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (France, 1985). This movie is probably the best concerning the Holocaust. A cinematographic fresco, an undertaking that took Lanzmann ten years to complete and 350 hours of reel, stands out by its undeniable quality. Unfortunately, using *Shoah* in class can prove problematic. Its 566 minutes on four DVDs and the fact that Lanzmann's editing is extremely subtle makes it difficult to use in an appropriate manner. To bypass those problems, the educator can consider showing the beginning of the movie and the two hours in the middle (starting from the Chełmno case).

To conclude, the Holocaust is a complex and difficult theme to address with students. It's probably French researcher Jean-François Bossy of the Institut National de la Recherche Pédagogique de Paris who best summarizes that difficulty by saying that it is hard to spread the memory of a genocide, an issue of knowledge and education, in a way that permits a certain critical and scholarly detachment. It is nevertheless what teachers must seek to accomplish in order to transmute that tragedy in a timeless cultural, political and human lesson.

RESOURCES

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- Eaglestone, Robert and Barry Langford, *Teaching Holocaust Literature and film*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 170 pages.
- Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of European Jews*. New York, Holmes and Meier, 1985. 3 volumes.
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